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NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: UM pharmacy Professor Gayle Cochran, (406) 243-6495

UM GERIATRIC SPECIALIST CAUTIONS ELDERLY ABOUT DRUGS

MISSOULA--

As bodies change with age, their reactions to drugs change and must be monitored carefully, according to a University of Montana pharmacy professor who specializes in educating students and medical professionals about drug use in the elderly.

"Drugs are the primary mode of treatment for most diseases in the elderly," said Professor Gayle Cochran, chair of UM's clinical pharmacy department. "But clearly there are dangerous things that can happen with drugs. A significant number of hospitalizations are drug-induced -- probably in the 10-20 percent range."

Cochran said she stresses two things in her frequent presentations on safe drug use: Try to reduce the total number of drugs a patient takes, and try to reduce the total number of doses per day.

Cochran has specialized in geriatric pharmacy for the past 15 years. Although she works mainly with professionals, she also has drug-management tips for elderly laypeople.

- Be sure your primary care provider -- nurse, pharmacist or physician -- is aware of every drug you take, including over-the-counter medications.

- Know exactly how, when and for how long to take your medication. Line your daily pills up in a special pill box if necessary.

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■ Carry a list in your purse or wallet of all the medications you take in case of an emergency. Include information about your diseases and allergies.

Drugs can have dangerous interactions, and use of multiple medications must be watched closely, Cochran said. This can be complicated, she said, because the high cost of drugs encourages people to shop for the best price at different pharmacies, making it difficult for any one pharmacy to have a complete record of what prescriptions a customer uses.

Similar problems arise when people have different doctors for different ailments. In other words, depending on a doctor or pharmacist to monitor medications isn't always enough. People need to get educated and adopt a "take charge" attitude about their drug use.

That is not a carte blanche for self-medication. While "drug abuse" is fairly uncommon in the elderly, Cochran said, elderly people do tend to overuse sleeping pills, tranquilizers and over-the-counter pain medicines, many of which play havoc with stomach ulcers, bleeding disorders and asthma.

"But a bigger problem is underuse," she said. People who can't afford their medications may cut back or go without, she said.

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